

# Committee on Community Resources and the Northampton City Council

## Committee Members:

*Councilor Dennis P. Bidwell*

*Councilor Maureen T. Carney*

*Councilor Alisa F. Klein*

*Councilor Gina-Louise Sciarra*

## Meeting Minutes

**Date: April 12, 2016**

**Time: 5:30 pm**

**Location: City Council Chambers  
212 Main St., Northampton, Massachusetts**

1. **Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call:** At 5:33 p.m., Councilor Sciarra called the meeting to order. Present were: Councilors Sciarra, Carney, Bidwell and Klein. No other city councilors were present.

### 2. **Committee Study Request relative to local economy:**

Councilor Sciarra reviewed the process for the Committee Study Request. She noted that today's agenda focuses solely on the CSR as there is no other business that has been referred to this committee.

Councilor Sciarra reminded the committee that the Committee Study Request came at the request of Council President Dwight and Vice-President O'Donnell. The request is to "study issues relative to the local economy with a focus on businesses and workers in downtown Northampton and downtown Florence." To address the request, the committee is gathering current data from within city administration as well as from outside organizations. At the first meeting (held on 3/21/2016) the committee heard from Economic Development Director Terry Masterson, Chamber of Commerce Director Suzanne Beck, as well as representatives from the Pioneer Valley Worker's Center and UMASS Amherst Labor Center. Today the committee will discuss the organization and dates relative to the public forums planned as part of this study. The committee would like to hear from workers, business owners, property owners and residents. After testimony is given, the committee will prepare a report for City Council consideration. The committee will not deliberate until the forums have been held and testimony has been given. The committee has created a webpage at the following address:

<http://northamptonma.gov/1679/Comm-on-Community-Resources-Study-Februa>

The page gives an overview of the CSR, shows upcoming committee dates, lists presentations that have been given so far, and provides links to committee minutes and to Youtube video recordings of meetings.

### 3. **Public Comment:**

Councilor Sciarra noted that the committee follows the same rules of order as are followed by the City Council: civility and respect are requested; committee members cannot respond to public comment; if a member of the public has a derogatory statement to make about a person or business, it is asked that the business or person not be referred to by name or obvious identifiers; this is not a forum for specific grievances and the public is cautioned that the committee is not the appropriate body to provide remedy to specific concerns.

Pat Goggins of Goggins Real Estate: Mr. Goggins is concerned about recent reports about downtown relating to vacant store fronts, especially the conclusions reached based on recent articles in the local newspaper. A certain portion of Mr. Goggins' business involves Main St.; the business does real estate leasing in downtown business areas. Mr. Goggins believes that there is a misconception about vacancy rates. Mr. Goggins was contacted by reporters in late fall of 2015. He was asked about "For Lease" signs in front of buildings. After the interviews were held, Mr. Goggins didn't see articles in newspaper about his discussions until March of this year. A lot of things have changed since the initial interviews. The articles, in an alarming way, reference vacancies suggesting something was going on contributing to the current level of vacancies. A couple of things need to be taken into consideration: a certain number of vacancies is normal after the holiday season. Other seasonality factors also happen. In the past, severe weather affected businesses. Some businesses had trouble "digging out" of the problems the winter weather caused. When interviewed, winter weather was one business concern that Mr. Goggins had been thinking about. Those reports, reaching whatever conclusions might have been reached in the fall, are now outdated. Goggins Real Estate does not have a single storefront now that is empty. This information concerns only the store fronts that Mr. Goggins controls. He is encouraged at the rate at which he has been able to fill the empty spaces and also the quality of the renters (characterized as for the most part as young entrepreneurs with a lot of energy and excitement. He has seen some lateral movement: business moving from one location to another. Mr. Goggins commented that the newspaper article mentioned one property owner with a number of empty store fronts. Mr. Goggins is aware of the concern; however, that property owner has his own pace. Even still he notes that the fact that store fronts are empty creates an overall impression that is hard to ignore. Mr. Goggins notes that there are still vacancies off Main Street: he wishes that he could those fill vacancies more quickly. Regarding businesses in Florence, Mr. Goggins notes that building construction in Florence costs the same to build as those in downtown Northampton; however, off-beat properties are more difficult to rent. Commercial lenders are becoming more aggressive toward lending needs for leasehold improvements. Lenders seem to be more conducive toward entrepreneurs. This helps to create the downtown that we like. There is still work that needs to be done; the city's participation in the process is important.

John Rhoades lives in Florence and is part owner of Union Station. He is here tonight to reiterate points made in City Council on April 7, 2016. Mr. Rhoades noted that it was mentioned by the City that the meals tax is showing a flat or declining trend over the past 4 years. Mr. Rhoades noted that a steady meals tax, while good for the city, is not good for the restaurant business. The issue is that costs are rising. A stable meals tax means that overall revenue remains the same while costs are continuing to increase. Businesses will soon go out of business if this doesn't change. When Mr. Rhoades first brought issues to the city after purchasing his business, he was faced with an unresponsive city government. He has had meetings with the Mayor, Dave Pomerantz, Wayne Feiden, and Terry Masterson. One concern is the lower parking lot at the Union Station property. Mr. Rhoades would like full control of the parking lot and has been willing to work with the City to design an agreement that will meet both the needs of the City and the needs of his business. The current agreement gives the City control of the parking lot up until 6 pm, however, people are allowed to stay parked until 6 am the following morning using a ticket purchased at a kiosk at 5:55pm. Even though the business has control of the parking lot after 6pm, the parking lot is often full and offers no opportunity for the business to generate revenue. Mr. Rhoades has no issue with City Council. Mr. Rhoades was born and brought up in Northampton and is willing to invest in the City, as are his business partners.

Rose Bookbinder currently resides in Haydenville but was brought up in Northampton. Ms. Bookbinder brought a full report to replace former draft version that was previously issued concerning "Challenges and Opportunities for Workers in the Northampton Restaurant Industry". A press conference was held last week to further explain the issues that were brought to the committee at its last meeting. She asks that the community think creatively about how to create sustainable economy in the food industry. Many of the lowest paying jobs in the US are in the food industry. With the vibrant economy that we see in Northampton, Ms. Bookbinder states that it is important to think about how to make those jobs more sustainable for workers and businesses. She likes the opportunity to partner with local municipalities to reinforce the wage and hour laws.

Ann Lucey lives at 42 Pleasant Street. She is a former Main Street business owner (record store) on Main Street. As a resident of downtown, Ms. Lucey commends the City for the efforts in the area of general upkeep. This is great for visitors and businesses. She believes that the D.N.A. is great to fill the vacuum left by the B.I.D. Ms. Lucey is willing to volunteer to help get the word out about the on-going forums that the committee will hold.

A translator & organizer w/ PVWC lives in Northampton as at 3 Edwards Square. She primarily works with undocumented immigrants. She encourages people to check out the articles written as a result of the recent press conference; up until the media coverage last week, the PVWC only heard from 3 workers, two of which were white workers. However, all workers need a living wage, and the group thought it would be important to give immigrant workers a forum to express their concerns. Workers in the community responded and have expressed their support. There were also employers who have indicated that they are able to provide a living wage and they are a model for other businesses. The PVWC is excited to work with the committee to decide ways to address the needs of the most vulnerable workers in Northampton.

4. **Approve minutes of the previous meeting:** Councilor Bidwell moved to approve the minutes of March 21, 2016 meeting; Councilor Klein seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 4 Yes, 0 No.

#### 5. **Schedule Public Hearings:**

The goal of the CSR is to identify practical recommendations that the City Council could pursue to strengthen local economy. As part of its process to gather data and information, the committee will schedule public hearings inviting stakeholders to speak about pressures and other matters that concern them. The committee is also interested in hearing ideas that may address the concerns shared with the committee.

Councilor Sciarra proposed the following topics as a starting point for the committee's consideration: Business ownership; Working downtown and workers; Property ownership & Leasing; Residing and visiting downtown; Consumer/Customer needs.

Councilor Klein recommended that the committee consolidate Business Ownership, Property Ownership and Leasing as one forum. She is also concerned that issues for workers may need to be discussed in more than one meeting at times that are staggered to accommodate shift workers.

Councilor Sciarra is concerned about combining business owners and property owners together. She feels that there are many business owners who are going to want to speak.

Councilor Carney suggested combining Residing and Visiting downtown with Property Ownership and Leasing might make sense.

Councilor Bidwell suggested that the important thing is to understand what the committee is trying to learn. He would like to get a better understanding about the cost of doing business in Northampton. He feels that there are business owners who are willing to open their books and share information about their operating costs. He thinks it would be worthwhile to understand what the cost is to run a business in Northampton compared to the cost of running the same business in say, Amherst. The cost of doing business would include rent, utilities, water/sewer, stormwater, etc. When flat revenues are talked about and compared to the higher costs of doing business over time, he feels it would be important to quantify this information. It doesn't matter what it is called, whether "Cost of Doing Business" or "Business Ownership", the question is really what are we trying to learn. Councilor Bidwell also mentioned that conducting exit interviews with businesses might bring an understanding about business closings, including understanding whether closings are due to retirements, competitive business pressures, perception of an uncooperative city government, etc. Councilor Bidwell feels that realtors are a good source for that information. Councilor Bidwell feels that it would be helpful to ask specific questions to get real data that the committee/council has been hearing time and time again.

Councilor Sciarra would like to present the forums as a package, but make each one distinct so that participants can decide for themselves where they would like to participate. A single flyer would summarize suggestions for each topic. Councilor Bidwell would also like to hear from participants what participants perceive as the opportunities. Councilor Carney suggested open ended questions might be helpful, including, "What are the challenges?", "What are the opportunities?" Councilor Bidwell suggested also asking, "If you were us, what would you like to see done?"

Councilor Klein would also like to learn more about the context of the economic indicators that is talked about; what are other cities' experiences, for example; what is normal? She feels that this is important given the public comment today suggesting that what is happening in Northampton is not abnormal. She also feels that it is important for the committee to provide a level of safety for participants, with the understanding that this is going to be a public forum. She wants to be certain that the committee doesn't set this up as an adversarial process. She also wants to be sure that the committee doesn't provide a set of false expectations. The subject matter of the CSR is complex and she wants to be sure it is clear what the committee might be able or not able to do.

Councilor Sciarra noted that she has tried to be clear that she has no idea what the recommendations might look like at the end of the process. It is hoped that some ideas may develop at the end of the process, but this might not happen. The request was to look at this and gather information. She feels that it is important to let people know that everybody will be heard from equally before the committee begins to talk about a plan. Deliberation along the way might lead to a much more adversarial outcome.

Councilor Bidwell agrees that the context is important. He had a discussion with Wayne Feiden about what other cities are doing. Terry Masterson's work focuses on the quantitative information; Wayne's information can provide policy and intervention details and planning perspective from other cities. He also wondered whether data is available through the Northampton Chamber of Commerce.

Councilor Klein wondered whether data gathering could be done before the public forums; Councilor Sciarra indicated that the committee study request had a 120 day time period at the end of which the committee needs to submit a report to the City Council. Councilor Klein believes that it is possible to request an extension to the 120 days. Councilor Carney noted that given the press and the initial interest in some of the work that has already been done, there are people who are waiting to be heard by the committee. Councilor Bidwell was a proponent of beginning the process with fact-finding first and getting a sense of context. He suggested that perhaps the committee could proceed on parallel paths. Councilor Klein wants the committee to be realistic about how much can be done in the given timeframe.

Councilor Sciarra believes that the work of the committee can be done in parallel, however, everything that the committee does must be done in public. Councilor Carney would prefer to start hearing from the public and then the committee can figure out how to hear from city resources. She suggested looking at available dates that the committee can meet.

Meetings that the committee already has are May 16 and June 20. Councilor Bidwell feels that the committee knows enough about the scope of what the project is to suggest that more time is needed to complete the Committee Study Request. He feels that the committee should already begin to think about asking for an extension of time to complete the work. Councilor Sciarra reminded the committee that this is the first CSR that has been commissioned; she believes that the committee needs to complete some sort of report within the 120 day timeframe. Her thought on how the committee would proceed was to generate a chapter, write up what is heard at the forum and then vote on it at the next meeting. Once the forums are complete, then the "meat" of the report would already been done. These would be detailed minutes that could be put together in a report. The report could indicate that the committee conducted public hearings, list what the committee learned about in terms of what the concerns were, and then indicate that the committee would like to continue working on a set number of items based on what the committee has learned. Councilor Carney suggested that the committee members could perform their own investigative study about a particular subject in which the member is interested.

Councilor Klein noted that when someone hires consultants to work on a project such as this, the person might conduct focus groups from various stakeholders and then create a report on the data gathered, whether

qualitative or quantitative. This is a huge project that the City might hire a consultant to do. She urges the committee to be realistic about what it can do within the stated timeframe.

Councilor Carney noted that she doesn't think that the authors of the CSR intended the committee to act as a consultant, but rather that the committee gather information and then identify a couple of areas that stand out as issues the City Council or individual councilors can address. Councilor Bidwell agrees that the committee needs to get to the point where a few items can be identified as worthwhile and within the jurisdiction of the City Council to address. However, the committee has already raised expectations that the committee will be hearing from various constituencies. He agrees that it will be difficult to complete everything necessary in the stated time frame. If the committee is not deliberating along the way and only taking testimony and hearing from constituencies, then he doesn't see what the committee can be producing along the way other than minutes. Meeting minutes are just one of the sources of raw data in the eventual process of trying to figure the bigger picture. He is not sure that minutes will represent anything that can point the committee in the direction of where the committee is heading.

Councilor Sciarra noted that the report might conclude that the City would be best served by hiring a consultant to do a broader look at this issue. She doesn't see why the committee can't satisfy the request and continue working on the issues.

Councilor Carney reminded the committee that Councilor O'Donnell raised this point at the first meeting; he gave an example of a very limited report that he imagined the committee might submit. The report might say this committee held a series of forums and there may or may not be items of a legislative nature that might be included. Councilor Sciarra agreed that she doesn't believe that proposed legislation is required at the end of the study. Councilor Klein suggested it is fine if the report consisted of a series of minutes from a series of forums. She is trying to be realistic about the time requirements to conduct such a study. Councilor Sciarra suggested that there may be themes that the committee might hear about and some analysis might be easier than thought.

Councilor Carney suggested that the committee might begin the forums before the next set meeting date of May 16<sup>th</sup>. She is aware that there are a significant number of workers who are already willing and available to come and speak to the committee. She believes that as a result, there might not be as much outreach required to reach these constituents. Afterward, because the committee is already planning two forums for workers, more effort for outreach could be done for the second meeting. Councilor Sciarra is concerned that there is a whole bunch of workers who are not involved with the organizations that have already presented. While Councilor Carney's suggestion might be practical, Councilor Sciarra feels that there is a general sense that this certain group has already been heard and has gotten a lot of press. She is concerned that the committee is only listening to that group. Councilor Bidwell has heard some of the same feedback and feels that the committee should be aware of the optics of this issue. He also points out that it is not just workers who have time conflicts.

The committee talked about perhaps scheduling six meetings on Mondays beginning in May noting possible exceptions would be holidays. Councilor Sciarra suggested a five minute maximum time limit per speaker. Councilor Bidwell asked that the committee allow room to invite presentations, including Terry Masterson, Wayne Feiden and perhaps the Chamber of Commerce. Councilor Sciarra's primary concern is hearing directly from people that are affected by the downtown economy. She is therefore, hesitant to have a lengthy presentation given before public comment. Councilor Bidwell suggested setting limits on the presentations, perhaps 10 – 15 minutes. Councilor Sciarra is concerned about giving privilege to one voice over another. Councilor Bidwell suggested that if we know there is data out there, we should avail ourselves to the information.

Councilor Klein expressed a serious concern about too many meetings in a short period of time. As a full-time worker in a demanding job, she feels that the time pressures don't allow her ample time to participate in a series of meetings in a short timeframe. She points out that the committee study request should be useful and produce useful information. Councilor Bidwell agrees and wonders whether the authors of the CSR intended for the committee to subject themselves to such pressures. If the committee provided a timetable and a plan, he wondered if the President and Vice President would object to a longer process. Councilor Carney noted that they have already made it clear that the committee should take the time to do what it needs to do. She

knows, however, that this study came about in part due to some work that was already begun regarding certain issues; those issues were combined in the context of a much broader scope and then given to the committee as an assignment.

Councilor Sciarra is fine with deliberating later in the process; however, she is not comfortable with not holding the forums now. There is a public conversation happening right now sparked by the committee, and she feels it is the committee's responsibility to handle that and to let everyone feel like that they have been heard. She feels strongly that the forums should be held in the timeframe in which they said they were going to be held. What the committee does with the information remains to be seen, and she is fine extending the timeline after the 120 day deadline.

Councilor Sciarra suggested that extending the forums to the July meeting would be fine to address the request; Councilor Carney suggested that perhaps only a couple of meetings would need to be scheduled. She suggested that property ownership and leasing might not require a huge amount of outreach.

After a discussion about possible dates, the committee settled on the following schedule:

#### **Topics:**

- Business Owners: May 16: 5:30pm
- Working and residing (evening): June 20: 5:30 pm
- Workers: June 27: 1:00 pm
- Property Owners, Leasing & Tourism: July 18: 5:30 pm

Councilor Sciarra pointed out that the committee may have other committee business that they will need to address on the dates set for forums. Councilor Bidwell suggested after the meeting dates, the committee could submit its report and then reconvene in September. The committee discussed the possible suggested topics for the Business Owner meeting: the cost of doing business in Northampton; problems and pressures felt by businesses and opportunities for Northampton business owners.

The committee talked about possible presentations and discussed possible questions for Wayne Feiden. Councilor Klein wondered whether it might be helpful to gather market analysis about what reasonable vacancy rates are for a downtown in a city of similar size; what is considered a normal rate of turnover for downtown business district; what are the lengths of stay for particular establishments in a downtown location. Councilor Bidwell indicated that he is not sure if Wayne Feiden could answer those questions without doing further research; the committee should ask only for information that is readily available. Councilor Klein suggested that Wayne could talk about cities that have had successful revitalization projects in the downtown area or what incentivizes growth in the downtown area. Possible date of the presentation: May 3, 2016 @ 5:30 pm. Councilor Sciarra will address the request with both Mayor Narkewicz and Wayne Feiden.

Councilor Carney moved to suspend council rules for extending/voting on invitations as part of the Committee Study Request; Councilor Bidwell seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 4 Yes, 0 No.

## **6. Reaching the Stakeholders**

The committee talked about coming up with a flyer complete with an introductory paragraph for each planned forum. The flyer will give the dates and times of each planned forum and will state that anyone can come to any meeting. The flyer will also establish the ground rules for speaking, including a time limit and will ask for participants to come to share ideas about opportunities to improve the downtown economy.

Councilor Klein would like to see a press release about the committee's proposed forums. Councilor Sciarra is considering outreach to the newspapers as well.

Councilor Sciarra asked the committee to send ideas to her about organizations or people who should receive an invitation directly from the committee about the forums.

## **7. Available Resources**

Councilor Sciarra explained that Jonathon Goldman, a former NHS student will be available sometime in May and is asking if there are any opportunities for an internship in city government. Jonathan has been before City Council in the past as a spokesperson for other city initiatives, including a city-wide composting program. He is interested in working with the committee during May and June. The committee is open to the idea of bringing Jonathan into the process of the committee study request. Councilor Carney suggested enabling the committee chair to give guidance to Jonathan without deliberation from the committee. Councilor Sciarra reported that Jonathan will be available in the beginning of May. Councilor Klein suggested Jonathan could help collect data regarding downtown areas, including what are considered normal vacancy rates; what are typical business turnover rates and to help determine what would be considered typical downtown commerce health.

## **8. New Business: None.**

Councilor Bidwell reported about a question that was raised at a previous committee meeting. There was a question about whether there is there a policy in the Assessor's Office to provide a tax break to property owners who had vacant storefronts. Councilor Bidwell quoted from an e-mail from City Assessor Joan Sarafin. The city does not lower value for vacant buildings in Northampton.

**9. Adjourn:** At 7:36 p.m. Councilor Bidwell moved to adjourn the meeting; Councilor Carney seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 4 Yes, 0 No.

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